Commentators often disparage biennials. It is said that they are over-large, that they are amorphous, that their themes and titles are woolly and relate in only the loosest ways to the works on display, that they are difficult to navigate and assimilate. Here, for instance, is The Guardian critic Adrian Searle, writing on the 2005 Venice Biennale: ‘Always, there is too much to see, things to forget and things that surprise and confuse. Confusion is good, but there’s too much of it.’

Taking this assessment to heart, some curators have in recent years tried to develop strategies suited to the scale and scope of the biennial (or quinquennial), as, for instance, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev did at Documenta 13 in 2012 when she created a small, dense show (‘The Brain’) that served as an introduction and hermeneutic key to the many other displays scattered around Kassel. More recently, the writer and curator Nicolas Bourriaud put forward his own response in the 16th edition of the Istanbul Biennial, a tightly conceived show addressing a clearly defined and acutely relevant issue.

The biennial was titled ‘The Seventh Continent’ after the vast collection of non-biodegradable debris, mostly microplastics, circling in the Pacific. It used this potent sign of collective failure to signal an engagement with the issue of environmental degradation and more broadly with the terms of our coexistence, past, present and future, with the natural world. The biennial thus pursued a line of inquiry initiated by Bourriaud with ‘The Great Acceleration’, the Taipei Biennial he curated in 2014. In Istanbul, he used a number of devices to show works to good effect while organising them in larger patterns that made for a coherent experience of the biennial as a whole. Firstly, he imposed a clear trajectory, with signs throughout the largest venue (the newly built Museum of Painting and Sculpture) advising the visitor to ‘see the exhibition from the ground floor up, following the numbers on the floor’. He moved away from the freeform experience of the traditional biennial, guiding visitors along a pre-set path that allowed him to craft clear thematic continuities. Secondly, a separate room was allocated to each artist or project so that it stood out clearly, with minimal interference, the room-sized displays forming a chain of discrete statements like the chapters of a book. Thirdly, works were grouped together in distinct sequences. At the Museum of Painting and Sculpture, each floor told a

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slightly different story, while the works on display at the second venue, the Pera Museum, approached related concerns from another perspective. Fewer works were on display at the last venue, the island of Büyükada in the Sea of Marmara, an hour by ferry from the city, and here the curatorial narrative was looser, the works brought together as much by the decaying villas in which they were shown as by any given slant on the larger theme.

Finally, Bourriaud enhanced the biennial’s legibility by opening with a series of information-rich pieces. On the first floor of the Museum of Painting and Sculpture, works in documentary formats dominated. Visitors could see scale models, vitrines, diagrams and relics, installations resembling exhibits in natural history museums and drawings modelled on infographics. Pride of place here went to a large, multipart display by Feral Atlas Collective, an international network of scientists, anthropologists, artists and others who examine the unintended (‘feral’) environmental consequences of human action. Using animation, drawing, film and text, they presented a range of grim case studies. Here was a video of albatross carcasses on Midway Atoll in the Pacific, their feathers falling symmetrically around dense collections of brightly coloured plastic objects where their digestive tracts once were. Nearby was a photograph of undergrowth in Alabama completely covered in parasitic kudzu vines, their spread favoured by the migration of farmers to urban areas. Beyond that was footage of the eruption of a mud volcano in Indonesia, a short distance from the site of a borehole newly drilled by an oil company. In clear-eyed and instructive terms, the display offered a catalogue of short-term human endeavours and their long-term environmental costs.

Feral Atlas Collective, installation view with *Alabama Fields*, 2019 (Helene Schmitz), inkjet print on archival fine art paper, courtesy of the artist, photo by Sahir Ugur Eren
Other works on the first floor expanded on this picture of ecological ruin. Some approached the issue in a similarly sober and plainspoken way, as Ozan Atalan did in his installation *Monochrome* (2019), which featured a water buffalo skeleton resting on a concrete plinth and two plasma screens bearing footage of buffaloes roaming through bulldozed areas near Istanbul, where their pasturelands have been cleared to make way for housing developments and the vast new airport. Other works on the same floor used documentary formats less to inform visitors than to query traditional anthropological protocols and their underlying assumptions, or to describe imaginable futures.

Among the more compelling projects here was Suzanne Treister’s sprawling *HFT The Gardener* (2014–2015), an installation revolving around a fictional biopic of a high frequency trader called Hillel Fischer Traumberg, who experiments with psychoactive plants, studies their chemical make-up and aligns them with companies listed on the stock market. Becoming a ‘techno-shaman’ and an artist, he makes works that are then collected by those very companies. The suggestion was that the drawings displayed alongside the video, psychedelic compositions that doubled as information sheets on various plants and their corresponding corporations, were Traumberg’s own creations. What, you wondered, had captured what here? Had the instrumentalising logic of high finance tamed the plants and put their properties to work, or had the hallucinogens uncovered and made over the abstracting force of capital?
This project paved the way for the works on the second floor of the museum, which were keyed to old and new spiritual forms, to shamanic and animist practices, animal spirits and nature worship. Many of these pieces also foregrounded the materiality of the natural world, occasionally setting it off against the material properties of manmade artefacts, their densities and textures. Jennifer Tee, for instance, showed wall pieces made of tulip petals. Inspired by traditional Sumatran *papelai* textiles depicting the journey of the soul after death, the works also touched on other journeys, including those of Dutch traders who originally brought tulips over from Central Asia and the traders who later shipped textiles to and from the Dutch colonies. In Haegue Yang’s immersive installation (*Incubation and Exhaustion – Version Istanbul*, 2019), manikins composed of polypropylene twine sat alongside exercise balls while various objects appeared in a vast photographic collage on the surrounding walls. Among them were pomegranates and hot peppers, medical robots, Secchi disks (used to measure water transparency) and ancient carved Medusa heads. Referring obliquely to rising temperatures (the chillies) and polluted seas (the Secchi disks), the objects were arranged in large constellations that looked alternately like waterborne waste and molecules in diagrammatic form. The effect was powerfully claustrophobic: here was a world in which nature and artifice were fused in a churning vortex and even the manikins, or spirits, were entirely synthetic. Also on the second floor was Suzanne Husky’s video of the ecofeminist and mystic Starhawk (*Earth Cycle Trance, Led by Starhawk*, 2019), who emerged from the darkness, picked out by a spotlight, as she intoned a long prayer-cum-meditation, occasionally chanting. Marrying pantheism and self-help, Starhawk asked viewers to concentrate on their breathing and imagine they were leaves, ‘dancing in the sunlight, swaying in the breeze’, before going on to talk in soaring terms about growth, the seasons and the benefits of oneness with nature, her performance enhanced by her stillness and aureole of light. It was difficult not to be impressed by her delivery – the seamlessness and ease of it, the steady cadences.
of her speech, the faultless professionalism. Equally, it was difficult not to be dismayed by the mind-numbing familiarity of her metaphors and larger message.

The mystical accents continued on the third floor but there the focus shifted to the body, and to human-animal relations. The sequence opened with a giant installation by Eva Kot’átková consisting of a cloth-covered, habitable sculpture and a long frieze of pictures and objects on one wall (The Machine for Restoring Empathy, 2019). The sculpture was a composite of animal parts and clothed human limbs – octopus legs extruding from a shirt, a hoodie with a fishtail, a bird’s head – and served as a stage for performers who occasionally sat in it, reading pithy anecdotes developed on-site in writing workshops and sewing new patches of coloured cloth onto the sculpture’s metal armature. As in Husky’s collaboration with Starhawk, the emphasis was on healing, but Kot’átková imagined it not as the gift of a soothsayer but as a collective exercise involving imaginative work – on the self, the social context and the environment, all at once. In this, the work prepared the visitor for others on the same floor that similarly equated personal injury and bodily transformation with ecological degradation and social trauma. Among these was Korakrit Arunanondchai’s arresting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 4 (2017), a video collage which mixes footage of public mourning following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in Thailand with clips of protests set off by the election of Donald Trump in the States, animals apparently grieving over their dead and the artist’s grandmother puzzling over and ordering her belongings as she wrestles with dementia. The voiceover is a probing meditation, addressed to a visitor from the future who takes the form of a drone, on different forms of memory – personal, familial and historical – and on the difficulty of weaving them together and so drawing on them for guidance in the present.
The curating was just as cogent at the Pera Museum, a smaller venue where Bourriaud chose to show encyclopaedic projects, works by artists offering totalising visions of other times and societies. Among these was a suite of recent drawings and installations by Charles Avery sketching sites, characters and creatures from ‘The Island’, an imaginary territory bounded by the sea and populated by men and women who gather eels, embrace on huge offshore towers and express themselves through slogan-bearing T-shirts. Here Bourriaud also followed the example of other recent biennial curators, notably Massimiliano Gioni at the 2013 Venice Biennale, by including the works of outsider artists and lesser-known figures from the recent and not-so-recent past. Norman Daly (1911–2008), who dreamt up a lost civilisation, that of the Llhuros, and cobbled together a large number of artefacts attesting to their ways, created pseudo-ethnographic displays and used them to draw elaborate conclusions on Llhuroscian society and lore. These displays are remarkable for their formal ingenuity as much as for their obsessive attention to detail, the artist having made many of the supposed relics out of household implements and mechanical parts. The botanical and zoological drawings of Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) are equally obsessive, turning sea creatures and microorganisms into kaleidoscopic patterns pulsing with colour.

On the island of Büyükada, Armin Linke’s multi-part installation picked up where Feral Atlas left off. Shown in a hotel pavilion, the installation consisted of a range of video reportages and old and new documentary records, all taken from Linke’s Prospecting Ocean project (2016–2018). Through these materials, the artist drew a complex picture of deep-sea mining today, investigating its ecological consequences, its effects on coastal communities and the international legal and political structures that enable and regulate it. Narrower in focus than the Feral Atlas displays, Linke’s project also showed a greater reluctance to synthesise and order the relevant
information, leaving those tasks to the viewer. Glen Ligon’s homage to James Baldwin, who lived in Istanbul in the 1960s, could hardly have been more different in tone or appearance. Formally economical but richly evocative, it touched on various moments in the history of the city, from Baldwin’s time to the present. One exhibit here was Sedat Pakay’s film of the writer in Istanbul (Another Place, 1970), to which Ligon added Turkish subtitles, turning a work that invited viewers to consider Baldwin as an exile into one that also urged them to view Istanbul through Baldwin’s eyes – and to reflect on the changes it has undergone since his time. It was worth taking the ferry to Büyükkada for Ligon’s contributions alone.

In Bourriaud’s biennial, as in all large shows, some works engaged more tangentially than others with the curatorial theme and the works around them. It is not unusual for the outliers to be among the more memorable projects – and so it was here. Simon Fujiwara’s It’s a Small World (2019) is a miniature rendering of a society built on the waste of our own, literally so since he collected plaster effigies of popular cartoon characters, discarded by their manufacturer near Istanbul, and turned them into a series of outsized architectural features, populating each with tiny white figures. The jail is a panoptic structure built around a bust of the Joker; the museum, an airy construction surrounded by the scuffed heads of Disney characters; the school, a bunker topped with Pinocchio’s wooden legs. An immensely intricate installation littered with darkly humorous details, Fujiwara’s work is a survey of a fully administered society in which citizens are lulled into compliance by art, entertainment and worship, while the Disney tune that gives the piece its title tinkles overhead, adding to the sense of unhinged cheer.
On the second floor of the Museum of Painting and Sculpture, where it was shown, *It’s a Small World* seemed anomalous. All around it were more earnest pieces, such as Husky’s film of Starhawk. And while most of these responded to the ransacking of the natural environment, *It’s a Small World* advanced an Orwellian – or more properly, Marcusian – nightmare, one premised on the domination of humankind, not of nature. But with its clear lines of legibility and connection, the curatorial scaffolding was strong enough to accommodate works such as Fujiwara’s. The biennial was marked by Bourriaud’s longstanding preferences and concerns, his taste for projects with a narrative thrust, for instance, and visions of the future. His interest in works embracing pantheistic and other forms of worship is more problematic, suggesting as it does that issues in need of concerted, worldwide action can be alleviated by private means, by turning inwards or back in time to recover a lost spiritual connection with natural forces. This interest was behind the more indulgent passages in an otherwise outstanding biennial that militated for climate action and a new post-Anthropocene ecological order – and did so in unusually lucid terms, with clear curatorial priorities that evolved as the visitor moved from room to room and venue to venue. It is time Bourriaud, who is best known for his writings, was given more credit as a curator. Certainly, he seems to have touched a nerve in Istanbul, where the authorities under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have long favoured massive infrastructure projects over environmental responsibility – and where visitors thronged to the 2019 biennial.

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